

Supplementary teaching material for Sessions One and Two

The teaching material may raise further questions. The following material is intended to support discussion. It anticipates the sort of questions that are often posed.

Jesus did not chose women as His Apostles because of the culture in which He lived.

It is true to say that men were more actively involved than women in leadership in the first century AD. The demands of family closely defined and limited women's lives. Some of the treatment of women at that time we would identify as prejudiced. When we seek to understand Our Lord's choice of twelve male Apostles from a wider band of disciples that included many women are we to understand this as indicative of the era and culture in which He lived?

It is helpful to reflect on the way in which women were included in the life and ministry of Our Lord. We find that He did not treat women as inferior to men. Supremely we have the example of Mary, who is the pattern of faithfulness and trust in her Son from the Annunciation to the Resurrection. She is in the midst of the first Church on the day of Pentecost. We find throughout the gospels a host of other women who similarly demonstrate a devotion to and understanding of Our Lord that is, in comparison, lacking in many of the male characters.

Joseph and Zachariah are presented as reticent and uncomprehending of the coming of the Saviour in the birth narratives. By contrast Elizabeth immediately recognised the child with whom Mary is pregnant. The Prophetess Anna in the Temple similarly recognises the infant Christ and straightaway speaks of Him to others. Throughout Our Lord's ministry He is accompanied by a band of women disciples who minister to Him and He to them. He frequently used the example of women in His parables and is completely unconcerned about breaking with social conventions in His interactions with women. It is the Apostles who are scandalised one day to discover Him talking with a lone woman at a well. Our Lord points to a widow at the Temple treasury and later to a woman weeping on His feet as those who show true responsiveness to God, over and against the clergymen of His day. During the Passion story the Apostles abandon, betray and deny Christ – the women disciples bravely accompany Him to Calvary. Even Pontius Pilate's wife has the insight to warn her husband to have nothing to do with condemning this man. It is to the three women called Mary who go to the tomb on Easter Day that the Good News of the Resurrection is first given. They are then the first messengers of the Gospel to others.

In the context of the Christ we meet in the gospels it is hard to believe that upon the important matter of forming the new priesthood in the choice of His Apostles He felt bound to act in a culturally conditioned way and choose only men. This would seem to contradict so much of what He did and said – unless we understand that His choice was not prejudiced but free

and deliberate. As we shall see later when we look at women's ministry, though not Apostles or priests, the Bible tells a rich story of the female vocation.

There is theological danger too in believing that Our Lord acted as a man of His age. It undermines our belief that He was (and is) God and as divine He acted always in a way that was perfect and sovereign. The gospels will always teach us that Christ was quite prepared openly to challenge social and religious conventions AND that He received as a gift from God twelve men as His apostles.

Christ did not chose women as His Apostles as the very notion of a female priest would have been unknown during His day.

Those who lived in the first century AD in Palestine, and indeed throughout the classical world, would have been very familiar with the concept and experience of women being priests. For many centuries priestesses had served the various pagan religions of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Some of the cults included the worship of female gods. During the early centuries of Christianity as the faith spread throughout this region there is evidence that some communities had women-priests. However, these were not orthodox Christian communities but ones defined by the Church as heretical such as the Gnostics and the Monanists.

The Bible teaches gender equality, so how can it be just that woman are excluded from the priesthood.

This is the point at which the various views held about the ordination of women are in agreement about some aspects but disagree on others. All should be able to agree that the Bible teaches equality and justice for both sexes. Where there is disagreement is about the nature of equality. Some will argue that equality means that men and women should be able to do exactly the same as each other because the sexes are interchangeable. Humans are essentially the same except for some biological differences. The other viewpoint, grounded in the historic faith, has taught that priesthood is not a matter of doing but of being. It's just not a question of whether women can do what a priest does. Rather it is a question of the very nature of creation as male and female. There is equality between the sexes and this is a radical equality that allows for difference. Equal in status and yet expressive of the male and female of creation. It is important that we don't confuse our thinking on this issue by becoming clichéd in our understanding of gender, for what we are seeking to discern is a spiritual identity that is God given and not one of human and cultural norms.

The Genesis story of creation speaks of our relationship with God and with each other. It describes in poetic language the interdependence and compatibility of the sexes that is not sameness. The story starts with a figure called Ha'adam, an unclearly gendered character. Man is created first in a division of Ha'adam. This first creation is not presented as

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superior, nor is it a failed first attempt! The significance of the story in speaking initially of the creation of man before woman emphasises that it is God who creates, not humanity giving birth to itself. This teaches us of our relationship to God as our creator. Woman is created as 'helper' – the Hebrew word is ezer. It's a word that does not mean domestic helper and it does not imply either that the one who needs help is subordinate to the helper. Ezer means divine help. The creation of male and female identifies humans as the ones who bear God's help to each other. To be a helper completes us as humans, to be selfish leaves us incomplete and alone. The reference to the rib taken from Adam to form Eve again teaches equality and holiness. The equality of the creation is certain for it is only God who acts. Rib is a poor translation of the Hebrew tsela that means most often the side part of the Ark or of an altar. Man and woman are created from what is sacred within them.

This story of our creation emphasises the dignity and identity of each gender as God given. Ministry is not about representing humanity to God. God wouldn't be God if He needed that! Ministry is about representing the being and activity of God into His creation. In very essence from the moment of creation we are male and female. It seems very plausible that what God has given in creation should continue to be reflected in ministry.

As a culture we are still breaking free from centuries old social conventions that closely defined masculine and feminine. These are often merely man-made roles and have no bearing in understanding male and female within the divine order of creation. It will be an exciting theological exploration to rediscover what Genesis is teaching us and it is likely to challenge some modern notions that gender equality is based on inter-changeability. We are taught that difference and equality can go together and form a creative whole. We may be expectant that gender is indeed to be expressed specifically in Church Order as it has been since the beginning of created order.

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Galatians 3: 28 "There is no such thing as Jew or Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus." Does this verse mean that the gender of a priest or bishop has no significance?

This teaching of S. Paul in Galatians is often used to explain that once we are 'in Christ' there can be no difference between humans and that this can be applied to our understanding of ordained ministry. Indeed to introduce difference could be to introduce an injustice. This however is to misunderstand S. Paul. He is certainly speaking about how through baptism (inclusion in Christ) we all enter spiritual unity receiving the same grace of God. This is granted to us regardless of any national, cultural, social or gender distinctions. The course of salvation history first started with Abraham and salvation had been believed for many centuries to be exclusive to the heirs of Abraham. S. Paul is teaching us that we can all be heirs and sons of Abraham – salvation is open to all. We all share the same status in the Father's house as heirs. Nowhere in Galatians does S. Paul mention ordained ministry, so it's hard to argue that we can apply this verse to this matter specifically. He is teaching us that through baptism we are all equally heirs of grace and salvation but this in no way means that God-given differences between humans somehow disappear. It challenges us to work for a radical equality that says, I will welcome and value difference and at the same time acknowledge that we are all of equal status in the Father's house.